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Fallen Angels in the *Book of Life**

GEROLD NECKER

In the second half of the thirteenth century the Italian philosopher Hillel ben Shmuel of Verona investigated the question of whether or not the myth of fallen angels is based on true and reliable sources.¹ Well acquainted with Latin scholasticism, he argues that even the idea of sinning angels originated within Jewish tradition. He writes how he found “in some homiletic books that one group of angels fell from heaven at the beginning of the creation of the world.”² It is not quite clear which “homiletic books” Hillel of Verona refers to. Moritz Steinschneider already noticed in his commentary to Hillel’s *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh* that the idea of the so-called “Fall of the Angels” is well-known, but the story of a heavenly revolt at the beginning of Creation is absent in rabbinic literature.³ However, Hillel of Verona did not expound the Jewish sources, but rather the problems of the specifically Christian elaboration of the concept. He explicitly rejects the Christian idea that angels were created with the capacity to sin, that one group of them was expelled from heaven because of their rebellion against God, and that the

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* Revised and expanded version of my lecture held at the 13th World Congress for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, 2001.

¹ In an appendix to his well known *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh* Hillel of Verona discussed three *quaestiones* (מבוקשים): two dealing with the problem of reward and punishment of the soul, and the third one investigating *היא אותה אמונה* אם אותה אמונה היא במפלת המלאכים, *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh*, ed. by Sh. Z. Ch. Halberstam, with an introduction and notes by M. Steinschneider, Lyck 1874, fol. 45a; this edition contains the *תגמולי הנפש* on fol. 45a–55a. The new and corrected critical edition of *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh* by J. Sermoneta, Jerusalem 1981, does not contain the appendix, which is preserved only in MS Munich, cod. heb. 120, fol. 63b–66a.

² כתוב בקצת ספרי דרש שכת אחד מן המלאכים נפלו מן השמים בתחילת בריאת העולם, *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh*, ed. Halberstam, fol. 52b.

³ Ibid., fol. 52b, note 2.

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souls of men are created to restore the cosmic order by ascending to heaven and filling up the ranks of the lost angels.⁴

It is my purpose in the following to show the popularity of the myth of the fall of the angels in the High Middle Ages. This myth was so widespread that it inspired at least one Jewish author to incorporate in his book the Christian idea of the replacement of fallen angels through ascending human souls. The book I am referring to is *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, the *Book of Life*. Composed at the turn of the twelfth to the thirteenth century, possibly in Northern France by the Tosaphist Hayyim ben Hanan'el of Paris, the *Book of Life* is a good example of the phenomenon that contemporary ideas, even if foreign to the Jewish tradition, found their way into Ashkenazi literature.⁵

According to Joseph Dan, the *Book of Life* represents an idiosyncratic school within Ashkenazi culture, whose affinity to the language and teachings of Abraham ibn Ezra clearly set it apart from the esoteric theology of the school founded by Yehuda he-Hasid and continued by his disciple Elazar of Worms.⁶ The *Book of Life* is written as an ethical treatise and shows a noticeable Neoplatonic tendency. It has been described by Joseph Dan as quite an encyclopedic work. Despite the literary character of the book as a whole, its author focuses on the human ability to apprehend the structure of the soul and its ability to return to its heavenly source by activating the intellectual virtues of knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Every soul is formed – literally carved – out of the light of the angels and ascends to its origin by way of the dedication of a person's life to purity and wisdom.⁷ At this point, in discussing the rules and the goal of human life, the author of *Sefer ha-Hayyim* introduces the tradition of the fallen angels, who try to seduce men on earth and thus prevent the soul from successfully ascending.⁸ The description of the evil forces in the *Book of Life*, to a certain degree, is based on Jewish tradition, but also includes an element foreign to it: Because of their craving for worldly power a group of angels had been cast out of heaven, and human souls were created to take their place.

⁴ Cf. J. Sermoneta, מופת המלאכים (השגותיו של ד' הלל בן שמואל מוידונא על, תורת המלאכים התומיסטים), ספר זכרון ליעקב פדירמן ז"ל, in: Sh. Pines (ed.), Jerusalem 1974, pp. 155–203.

⁵ Cf. G. Necker, *Das Buch des Lebens*. Edition, Übersetzung und Studien, Tübingen 2001, pp. 16ff. (citations from the *Book of Life* will be from this critical edition).

⁶ Cf. J. Dan, תורת הסוד של חסידות אשכנז, Jerusalem 1968, p. 52.

⁷ Cf. *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §81, according to MSS Parma, cod. Parm. 2082, Petersburg Evr. II A 375 and Budapest, Kaufmann A 271.

⁸ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §80.

Out of envy and hate the fallen angels then serve as a kind of global antagonist to their future successors. In the words of the *Book of Life* this combination of traditions reads as follows:⁹

“Angels have never been sentenced to hell except for the group that fell from the highest heaven. In the beginning there had been angels in all ten firmaments. Those living in the highest one and filled with the highest light saw all the worlds beneath them, all ranks and all (kinds of) light and every troop. They came down to earth and said that they would never return to heaven, but rule over the inhabitants of earth.

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took them up (to heaven) against their will, judged everyone according to the measure he chose and sent them down. Some of them descended into the abysses, because they said their reign shall be in the abysses; some of them fell into the oceans, because they chose to rule over the oceans first. And some fell on mountains, some on hills, some in forests and some into the deserts. Everyone was sentenced according to what he had chosen and his light withdrew – *a wind that passeth away*, forever. And the Holy one, blessed be He, directed them to their place of rule in the sublunar world, to act there as they wish, but without enjoying it.”

After the punishment of the disobedient angels, the *Book of Life* continues the story:¹⁰

“The Holy one ordered the good angels to ascend and descend in the air, to straighten the world and to give the souls of men good advice, so that they can live and take (their) place in heaven, and sing and praise in the place of those that fell. (...) But the sinful angels, who are also called the evil inclination, are ready for destruction, (trying to prevent) the highest firmament from ever being reestablished or resettled.”

The idea of the fallen angels being replaced in heaven by human souls is unknown in Jewish tradition, but it recalls the Christian doctrine *supplementum ruinae angelicae*, formulated by Thomas Aquinas.¹¹ Thomas gave a very similar explanation for what constitutes an angel's sin: his desire to gain *similitudinem Dei quantum ad potestatem*, that is “to be like God regarding power.”¹² Hillel of Verona describes the belief of his Christian opponents in the same way: “These angels were presumptuous ... and wanted to become lords of the world.”¹³ This expression fits in well with what we read in the *Book of Life*: they wanted to “rule over the inhabitants of earth.”

⁹ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ ST I 108.8.

¹² ST IIb 163.2

¹³ אֹתָן הַמַּלְאָכִים נִתְּגָאוּ ... וְרָצוּ לִהְיוֹת אֲדֹנֵי הָעוֹלָם, *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh*, ed. Halberstam, fol. 52b.

Moreover, the *Book of Life* contrasts this view explicitly with a rabbinic statement:¹⁴

“There will be a new heaven, because the sinful angels departed, those who fell from there. According to our rabbis, because they did not agree to the creation of man, God stretched out his hand and burned them. According to the view of the nations, because they were prideful and created ... the evil spirits and are called evil inclination, sweeping in the air like the holy angels.”

Interestingly enough, in the *Book of Life* the teachings of the rabbis are restricted to the tradition of angels being burned because they opposed the creation of man (bSan 38b). Of course, there are many Midrashim illustrating the theme of rivalry between angels and men, and these stories are not limited to the opposition of the angels to the creation of man, but also include their opposition to the giving of the Torah to Israel and to the descending of the Shekhina to the sanctuary as well.¹⁵ In *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter seven, we are told about angels “who fell from their holy place in heaven” and are “pursued with a rod of fire,” when they try to ascend. However, even in this account of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, which is included almost verbatim in the *Book of Life*, a rebellion of angels puffed up with pride and exerting themselves to equal God, is missing. The author of the *Book of Life* is therefore right to attribute this motive to “the view of the nations.” Being not so interested in the reasons why the angels were cast down, he is all the more concerned with their original place: Only the highest angels, the tenth order, sinned and were expelled, leaving the highest rank in heaven vacant.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to emphasize that this idea formulated in the *Book of Life* is not primarily rooted in the scholastic writings of the High Middle Ages, but reflects in fact a rather popular belief among Christians at that time.

The story of the Fall of the Angels, first recounted in the apocryphal Book of Enoch,¹⁶ assumed a certain prominence in Christianity. Beginning with Gregory the Great, a disciple of Augustine, the idea that there are nine orders of angels became widespread in the Latin Middle Ages. The classifying of the celestial hierarchy into nine ranks goes back to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who wanted to demonstrate that the trinity of God is symbolized by three triads of angels. Neither of the two dominant scholastic theologians dealing with angels, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura, dared to challenge this symbolic meaning of the celes-

¹⁴ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §76.

¹⁵ Cf. P. Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, Berlin 1975, p. 235.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Enoch 6–11; 69, 2–25; cf. Schäfer, *Rivalität*, p. 24f.

tial hierarchy. Both of them agreed that a tenth chorus would be constituted by righteous men, who would be taken up into heaven by entering one of the nine orders of angels according to their merits. The only difference between Thomas and Bonaventura lies in Bonaventura's statement, that those human beings who are allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven, without having first achieved the dignity of angels, are to be summoned into a lower, now tenth order of their own.¹⁷

Before the teaching about the three triads of angels distributing the souls of the elect among themselves reached its peak in scholasticism, the notion that it must have been the highest angels who fell from heaven started to flourish in Christian homilies. This conclusion was drawn from the idea that it was Lucifer, the most exalted angel, and his followers, who out of pride and haughtiness had rebelled against their maker.¹⁸

In the first half of the eleventh century, Aelfric the Grammarian, abbot of Eynsham and also a distinguished literary figure in Anglo-Saxon England, delivered sermons in Old English on the Fall of the Angels. The ideas expressed in Aelfric's sermons were still being referred to in the High Middle Ages. According to Aelfric's homilies the story was as follows:¹⁹

"Mankind was created to take the place of the tenth host, for the tenth host was guilty of pride and all turned into wicked demons ... Now the nine hosts are named ... the tenth perished. So mankind was created to fill the place of the lost ranks."

By the thirteenth century the view that God had created humanity in order to replace the fallen angels had turned into a well-known, popular belief. Duns Scotus, the Franciscan *Doctor subtilis*, who taught in Oxford, Paris and Cologne, complained about the "loose manner" of using the term *tenth order* for the fallen angels and for the humans who allegedly replace them. He put forward the following argument:²⁰

"It is clear that a tenth order was not formed out of humans, as if there were nine ranks of angels and a tenth of humans; rather, humans are brought up into all the ranks of angels according to their merits. When we read that a tenth order was to be filled up with humans, we ought to understand it to mean that what had been lost among the angels was restored among humans and that as many angels fell as *could have made up* a tenth order."

¹⁷ Cf. Necker, *Das Buch des Lebens*, p. 75f.

¹⁸ Cf. ST I 63.7 (*utrum angelus supremus inter peccantes, fuerit supremus inter omnes*).

¹⁹ Quotation from R. B. Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca/London 1984, p. 151.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 237.

Obviously, the scholastic view of the heavenly realm was based on the description of Dionysius the Areopagite. This view argued sophistically that only nine proper orders of angels existed and that the fallen ones constitute a tenth group, but not a tenth order. However, it became better known in a much simpler way. In popular preaching, and, later on in the Middle Ages, in morality plays and visionary literature like *Piers Plowman*, the starting point was just as easy to grasp as in the *Book of Life*: “In the beginning there had been angels in all ten firmaments.”

Finally, I would like to take up again the question concerning the nature of the sin of the fallen angels as discussed in the *Book of Life* and its Latin-Christian environment. Besides the already mentioned motives – the angels’ wish to gain power and to compare themselves to God, the hubris which led to their fall – there is an additional motif, common to both rabbinical Judaism and early Christian tradition. The cryptic account in the Book of Genesis, Chapter six, “that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair, and they took them as wives,” was developed first in the apocryphal book of Enoch.²¹ The angel Shemhazay and his associate Azazel are named there as the two leading protagonists, who by means of an oath bound the angels who came down with them, revealed heavenly secrets and corrupted human life on earth. Astonishingly enough, this pair of renegade angels appears in rabbinic sources at a very late stage. Whenever they are mentioned, their sin is connected with the reasonable explanation that they wanted to prove the sinfulness of men by putting themselves in the same condition. In a Midrash quoted in Jalqut Genesis,²² for example, they test whether they could resist the evil inclination, but only end up almost immediately failing once they behold the beauty of the daughters of men. In the opening chapter of Midrash *Aggadat Bereshit* the two angels are reported to have tried to return to heaven after they committed their sinful deeds.²³ It is explicitly stated there that because of their defilement they were unable to ascend, and that they could never become pure again. The same interpretation is given in the *Book of Life* when mentioning the tradition of the two sinful angels.²⁴ Here, however, the emphasis is not put on various details of the story, but on the conclusion: “If they hadn’t become unclean, they could have returned to their holi-

²¹ Cf. 1 Enoch 6,7.

²² Jalq Gen §44; cf. Schäfer, *Rivalität*, p. 105f.

²³ Cf. B. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels*, Philadelphia 1952, p. 130.

²⁴ Only in MS Budapest 271 they are called Shemhazay and Azazel, the other MSS read Uzza and Aza’el.

ness.”²⁵ He is interested in telling people how they can climb the stairway up to heaven. The author emphasizes the need for living in a state of purity that comes close to the monastic ideals of asceticism and sexual abstinence. His heroes are the prophets, who turned their backs on towns and settlements, preferring to live in solitude, as well as the Nazirites, who refrained from sexual intercourse.²⁶

One learns about a quite similar attitude towards sexuality when reading the reasons for the Fall of the Angels as stated by Thomas Aquinas. The Dominican friar, also called *Doctor angelicus*, seems to have been rather irritated by the thought that holy spirits could have enjoyed so carnal a pleasure. He writes about this tradition by quoting an ancient church-father: “Demons are enjoying themselves with sinful carnal obscenities, as Augustine said in the second book of *De Civitate Dei*”²⁷ (I, 63.2). In his commentary to this statement, however, Thomas finds reason for demonic delectations only in *invidia*:²⁸

“The demons do not delight in the obscenities of the sins of the flesh, as if they themselves were disposed to carnal pleasures: it is wholly through envy that they take pleasure in all sorts of human sins, so far as these are hindrances to a man’s good.”

The *Book of Life* describes the mirthless being of bad angels in quite a similar way, but without distinguishing between impossible carnal pleasures for angels on the one hand, and their delight in carnal pleasures as human sins on the other:²⁹ “Therefore their only achievement is to do harm to mankind, but without enjoying, because they will never obtain any pleasure.”

Not very surprisingly, the story of Shemhazay and Azazel seems to have been popular in the Latin Middle Ages, too. William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris in the first half of the twelfth century, recounts in his treatise *De universo* that he read in an “hermetical book” about two angels criticizing mankind for its sinfulness.³⁰ But when, through God’s will, they became incarnate in order to see how much better

²⁵ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §38.

²⁶ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §24.

²⁷ ST I 63.2.

²⁸ Ibid.: [Ad primum ergo dicendum quod] daemones non delectantur in obscenitatibus carnalium peccatorum; quasi ipsi afficiantur ad delectationes carnales: sed hoc totum ex invidia procedit, quod in peccatis hominum quibuscumque delectantur, in quantum sunt impedimenta humani boni.

²⁹ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §80: על כן אינם עומדים כי אם להזיק לאדם ולא להנאתם כי לעולם לא יקנו שום הנאה.

³⁰ Cf. the summary in L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Vol. II, New York 1923–24, p. 357.

they would do, they fell in love with a beautiful woman who returned their love on condition that they renounce the name of God. When they indeed did this, God summoned them to heaven, reproved them and told them to choose their place of punishment on earth. It is significant that in the *Book of Life*, which knows about sinful angels recalled to heaven and condemned to the very place on earth chosen by themselves, the tradition of Shemhazay and Azazel is placed in a context which makes clear what it is that prevents human souls from ascending on high: being entrapped in sensuality. In the *Book of Life* the goal of mankind is called the “mystery of the angels,”³¹ and men can possibly participate in angelic holy life while still being on earth. When citing the well-known rabbinic dictum about what equates man with animals and what differentiates him from them, the author of the *Book of Life* changes his source: In *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, a Midrash frequently used in the *Book of Life*, the tradition is mentioned that men are like angels because of their knowledge, their ability to walk upright and to speak the holy language. In contrast to that the *Book of Life* holds that man can make himself equal to angels by speaking the holy language, carefully watching not to eat too much (and only out of hunger), and abstaining from sexual intercourse.³² The decent soul becomes wise, ascends on high and obtains the glory the fallen angels lost.³³

Belief in a world full of good and bad angels was widespread at the time when *Sefer ha-Hayyim* was written. It is reflected in Yehuda he-Hasid's *Sefer Malakhim* and *Sefer Hasidim*, as well as in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* and Berthold of Regensburg's homilies. Nobody would have expected the author of the *Book of Life* to have a different worldview since he shared with the other writers the same Ashkenazi culture in Central Europe. But his efforts to include contemporary Christian thinking are much more intrinsic to his work. One example, as I have tried to show, is the adaptation of the doctrine of the replacement of fallen angels by ascending human souls. Unlike the theological perspective on the celestial hierarchy as developed in scholasticism, the heavenly order in the *Book of Life* is divided into ten firmaments. The number ten – in the Middle Ages so pregnant with meaning – the *numerus aureus*, is favored in the *Book of Life* and appears

³¹ *Sefer ha-Hayyim* §27: סוד מלאכי השרת.

³² Ibid.

³³ Man achieves a state of liturgical purity, a vision of God and the sovereign rulership the fallen angels struggled for, as one might suppose: הוא נכנס בראיית השם ועולה: במעלות הסולם הגדול מעלה אחר מעלה עד שמגיע לכבוד הגדול ואומר ועושה גיור ומקיים

almost omnipresent. The division of the cosmic order into ten firmaments, all of which have once been inhabited by angels, seems to have been a kind of *sensus communis* in the Middle Ages, at least in vernacular literature – and this, too, despite the scholastic verdict about the “loose manner of speaking” of the number ten, which deprives the celestial realm of its trinitarian symbolism. But one should not fail to notice the conspicuous difference in the starting points of Jewish and Christian accounts: the haughtiness and pride of that most exalted angel, Lucifer, which led to the heavenly revolt, but who is not once named nor even alluded to in the *Book of Life*. Lucifer was quite a popular figure in the medieval world, but in the *Book of Life* the devil, other than the fallen angels, does not have even a negative function in the restitution process of the cosmic order. In the end, it is said in the *Book of Life* that “all men will be like angels” and “the souls of the *Zaddikim* are under the throne of glory, where the image of Jakob is engraved, and enjoy the splendor of the *Shekhina*.”³⁴ The Neoplatonic tendency in the *Book of Life* is apparently embedded in Jewish tradition, but includes, as I have tried to show, elements of contemporary thinking definitely based on Christian theology.

The philosopher Hillel of Verona, who completed his *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh* twenty years after the oldest preserved manuscript of *Sefer ha-Hayyim* was written in Northern Italy, may have known of other books, besides *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, which are lost today and which included the Christian teachings about the Fall of the Angels. Interestingly enough, in an Ashkenazi manuscript³⁵ dating from 1440, the view of *Sefer ha-Hayyim* still covers the theological needs of the time and is paraphrased – though with slight differences – in the following way:³⁶

“It is impossible that the Holy One, blessed be he, created angels who accuse and instigate men to sin. If this would be the case, man had no choice but to do so. It is said that those instigators are Shemhazay and Aza’el, who fell from heaven, they and their troops, numerous angels, leaving their place in heaven empty. (Every) soul of a *Zaddiq* is to be seated on one of their seats. They try to ascend, but the angels on high go after them and throw them down. Sometimes, when they see a righteous man on earth, they try to persuade him to transgressions, because they fear lest he could fill up a place on high. Since they always hope that the Holy One, blessed be he, will forgive their sinfulness descending from heaven and sinning like men, so that

³⁴ *Sefer ha Hayyim* §§81, 98.

³⁵ MS Jerusalem, JNUL 81136, fol. 50b; cf. the description of this Manuscript (and the copy in MS Moscow, Lenin State Library, Günsburg 333) in Necker, *Das Buch des Lebens*, p. 46f.

³⁶ The Hebrew Text, ending with “from the *Book of Life*,” is found in *ibid.*, p. 47.

they can hold their original position again. Our Sages said:³⁷ *Because he hath done great things – against scholars more than against anyone else.*”

The combination of the myth of the Fall of the Angels with the Christian motif *supplementum ruinae angelicae* seems to have been still popular toward the end of the Middle Ages. However, the philosophical standing, at least when formulated from an apologetical perspective, as did Hillel of Verona, expressed a very indignant condemnation of this specific Christian version of a once common tradition:³⁸ “I consider this an empty, silly belief, devoid of any foundation.”

³⁷ Suk 52a (on Joel 2,20); the context implies that scholars are more seduced by the evil inclination than everybody else.

³⁸ *Sefer Tagmule ha-Nefesh*, ed. Halberstam, fol. 52b: ואני אומר שהיא אמנה בדאית וסכלות ואין לה על מי שתסמך.